Kustom Film Kommando

Interview With Filmmaker Kenneth Anger

BY CLAY SMITH, FRI., OCT. 31, 1997

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Kenneth Anger, who will be in Austin this Halloween weekend, is a premier figure of American avant-garde cinema. Legendary as an underground filmmaker, Anger prefers to regard himself as a maker of magick, albeit one who uses the camera as his medium to the occult. Born around 1930 (the year varies slightly by source), Anger (an adopted name) grew up in Santa Monica, California. He started making his own movies at a young age in 1941 with *Who Has Been Rocking My Dream Boat?* and numerous other shorts, all of which were later destroyed by the filmmaker's own hand. While still a child, Anger appeared (uncredited) in Max Reinhardt's visually lush Hollywood feature *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1935) and he also partnered with Shirley Temple at dance school cotillions. Anger's fascination with Hollywood's early decades has remained constant, as seen in his two tell-all, slash-and-burn *Hollywood Babylon* volumes, virtual picture books chronicling the seamier, more lurid details of the lives and deaths of Hollywood past.

In his films, however, Anger far from evinces a Hollywood aesthetic. He has had a spotty production history and constant film financing problems, creating some 12 films since his 1947 short *Fireworks*, which Anger shot over one weekend at his parents' house while they were out of town. Though not Anger's most polished or cohesive film, it is bold and poetic; only 15 minutes in length, its gay content is nothing less than iconographic. In fact, "homoerotic" is too genteel a word to describe the film's action, which consists of a 17-year-old Anger as the protagonist who has a dream (or actual run-in) with buff sailor boys who in classic Anger fashion strut their stuff in an exhibitionistic, S&M manner

and beat the protagonist silly. Anger's own synopsis of *Fireworks* assumes a familiarity with the work but is nonetheless insightful: "A dissatisfied dreamer awakes, goes out in the night seeking a `light' and is drawn through the needle's eye. A dream of a dream, he returns to bed less empty than before." Anger evades description of the film's more overtly sexual moments, like his visual pun in which the protagonist is seen lying in his bed with a huge erection under the covers that turns out to be a wooden African totem, or the ending moments of the film, in which a sailor's fly harbors a roman candle firecracker which is lighted and shoots out sparks, thus bestowing the film's title. Later, Anger would euphemistically write about the film, "This flick is all I have to say about being seventeen, the United States Navy, American Christmas, and the Fourth of July."

But if his films are subversive, that aesthetic hasn't hindered numerous "borrowings," which, as he alludes to in this interview, are both bane and potential boon to Anger. The kitsch, irony, and montage editing of Anger's best-known work, *Scorpio Rising* (1964), is indeed replicated by today's unknowing generation of MTV filmmakers, as Anger is only too aware. Anger describes his sacrilegious 30-minute tribute to the myth of the American motorcyclist as "the Power Machine seen as a tribal totem, from toy to terror... Thanatos in chrome and black leather and bursting jeans." *Scorpio* is a catalogue, an iconography of the eternality of the American tough and his depiction in film, and ends with what, in Anger logic, is the result of all that adulation: an orgiastic rite. If Anger's summary reads somewhat enigmatic and mystical, understand that that's no mistake on his part. In addition to being an avant-garde filmmaker, Anger is an occultist. As any good supplicant of the notorious English magus Aleister Crowley should be, Anger has proved to be his own best experiment or invention.

On Friday, October 31 (a perfect Anger date), from 8-11pm, a screening of what Anger calls his Magick Lantern Cycle, nine films (*Fireworks*, *Puce Moment*, an extended version of *Rabbit's Moon*, *Eaux d'artifice*, *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*, *Scorpio Rising*, *Kustom Kar Kommandos*, *Invocation of My Demon Brother*, and *Lucifer Rising*) will be shown on the UT campus in the auditorium of Burdine Hall, at the intersection of Dean Keeton (formerly 26th St.) and University Ave. On Saturday, November 1, several events are scheduled. From 4-5:30pm, a panel entitled "The Impact of the American Avant-Garde on Mainstream Cinema," with UT professors Thomas Schatz and Connie Shortes (RTF Dept.) and Bill Lundberg (Art Dept.) will take place in the auditorium adjacent to the Huntington Gallery on the UT campus. Later that day, from 10pm-4am, an event titled "The Re-Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome: A Hollywood Babylon Ball and Casting Call Party" will take place at the Ranch Studios (1101 Reinli, behind Capital Plaza), with performances by And You Will Know Us by the Trail of Our Dead and DJ Lord Vishnu; $10 admission. Admission price and donations help defray the costs of Anger's Austin visit and will be placed in a fund dedicated to financing future Kenneth Anger film projects; in*situ is the local film organization hosting Anger's visit. Also, on Sunday, Nov. 2 at 1pm, Anger will be signing copies of *Hollywood Babylon* at Borders. For more info, call 481-0493.

Austin Chronicle: I think the first order of business is finding out what you've been up to lately.

Kenneth Anger: Well, I have a book I'm working on [*Hollywood Babylon 3*] and I've done two of them, so that is an ongoing project and I expect to have it done soon, at least that is my hope.

AC: Are you working on any other projects at the same time as you're working on the book?

KA: I have a couple of film projects. I hope to be filming one of Aleister Crowley's works, *Gnostic Mass*. It's a short, it'll be a half-hour, but it will involve about a dozen people and have music and dialogue.

AC: Do you know yet which of your films will be screened when you're in town?

KA: What I call my Magick Lantern Cycle, nine films. It starts with Fireworks and ends with Lucifer Rising. Incidentally, this is the 50th anniversary of *Fireworks*; I made it in 1947.

AC: And didn't you make it at home when your parents were out of town?

KA: Yes. I made it over one weekend. I wish I could still do that.

AC: Let me ask you a "thematic" question about some of your works. I'm thinking of Rabbit's Moon and Fireworks but also the Babylon books, where in all of them there's an almost relentless, sped-up pace. That's certainly true of the Babylon books; you can get through them really quickly...

KA: Well, they're picture books and they're almost like movies because I'm very visually oriented. The pictures are certainly as important as the text and there's a lot of jokes and surprises as you turn pages. You find illustrations that may not seem to go with the text.

AC: Would it be fair to assume that Cocteau is an influence then?

KA: Yes, he certainly is one of my influences. He was much more than a filmmaker; he didn't get into filmmaking until middle age. But he was a child prodigy poet and did very experimental work and choreographed for dance and was involved in so many things.

AC: And is that what you most admire about him?

KA: Well, that he was a poet in many fields -- among them film -- that he was fascinated with and was able to work with. He started in 1930 with *Blood of a Poet*. And I was fortunate enough to meet him when I went to Europe. He was on the jury at a festival where I sent *Fireworks*. He wrote me a letter saying that he liked it, so I decided I had to meet him the next year, in 1950. I stayed [in Paris] 12 years. I was fortunate for an American to find a job almost immediately. I worked for 12 years for Henri Langlois at the Cinématheque Française and had a very close relationship with him.

Kenneth Anger (r) in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

AC: The new work that you have on slate, Gnostic Mass, is it a revision or return of any sort to previous work?

KA: I've never made a film using dialogue or speech, so this will be quite a departure for me. I've planned several projects using speech but never have actually done them, mostly because of the tremendous cost to make them. My films up to now have been silent with musical accompaniment. This will be quite different.

AC: Well maybe I should be more specific -- what I'm asking about is this kind of thread that runs throughout your career of returning to previous works and doing revisions and I just wanted to hear a bit more...

KA: No, this will be a departure for me, but I use ritual in my other films, sometimes in a humorous way, sometimes quite serious. In fact, I admire Cocteau for that because you never know when he's kidding and when he's serious, and I admire that.

AC: Can you describe the audiences at the various original exhibition dates of your films? Was it all arthouse circuit and maybe university circuit?

KA: I've had everything from large spaces to smaller, experimental ones. I met Bertolt Brecht with Charles Laughton in the very same theatre where *Fireworks* was first shown, at the Coronet Film Society. This is a theatre that seats about 300, an intimate theatre, but it's perfect for showing experimental kinds of films. It really was a place where you met all sorts of people. James Whale -- the director of *Frankenstein* -- came, and Dr. Kinsey. Dr. Alfred Kinsey was there and he invited me to do one of his famous interviews for his book on human sexual behavior, and he also said he wanted to buy a print of *Fireworks* for the collection at the Kinsey Institute, which was the first time I sold a print of my film.

AC: You've visited Austin before.

KA: Yes, it's been about 10 years or so. I spent some time at the HRC [UT's Humanities Research Center] collection, looking at the film collections. The Gloria Swanson collection is there, and I looked at that. I hope I'll be able to consult some of the things there. I don't think they have any Zanuck material, because Zanuck was my neighbor here in Palm Springs and his estate is just around the corner. I live in the Al Jolson estate, in Al Jolson's last house. But I think the Zanuck material has ended up in Wahoo, Nebraska, in his birth house. I've got quite a few Zanuck things. He was a wild game hunter and I have some of the pieces that he shot.

AC: Sitting in your house right now?

KA: Yeah, I have a water buffalo that he shot; I've got pictures of him shooting. I'm not much into blood sports, but these things came my way when his daughter moved away from Palm Springs, these things she didn't really want in her new house. She said I could have them.

AC: If I could switch gears again to *Hollywood Babylon* -- I guess for lack of a better term, currently there's a "gossip industry." I mean there are tabloid shows, of course there are tabloid papers. Is *Hollywood Babylon* in any way a forerunner of this phenomenon?

KA: Well, of course it was, I mean I sort of made a lot of these kind of tabloid gossip papers and things if not respectable at least legitimate. But frankly my interest is more in Hollywood's past than its present.

AC: What era does it principally cover?

KA: Well, I go up to the O.J. case and the Hugh Grants and all those things but, basically, I treat them with a certain contempt. The glamour is just not there for me with the current crop. I mean some of them are good actors and so forth; I just can't get very excited about them.

AC: What kind of audiences do you think you might have when you come to Austin at the screening of your films?

KA: Well, I had a good crowd the last time I was in Austin. I suppose it will be perhaps some of the art community, maybe some film students and then the groups that are interested in Aleister Crowley, on which I'm an expert; there's a little clan there (in Austin).

AC: Now tell me about this event called the "Re-Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome" that's supposed to take place when you come.

KA: This is my host's idea, because, actually, it's kind of a surprise for me. I think he's going to have the balcony arranged in some kind of decor echoing my film *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*, which already inspired... did you see *Pillow Talk* with Rock Hudson and Doris Day?

AC: Yes.

KA: It said in there that it's inspired by the room in *Pleasure Dome*!

AC: Well I guess you know that will be one of the panel topics when you come to town -- the influence of the avant garde on mainstream cinema.

KA: Well, of course, people steal from me and it doesn't mean that I'm particularly happy about it, but there's nothing I can do about it and I can't copyright my images. I will say I'm "bemused," particularly by borrowings by MTV. And there are several groups that have done practically carbon copies of certain scenes from my films. And of course they've never given me a call saying, "Why don't you make a music video for us?" I could use the money. Unless I didn't absolutely despise the music, I might even think of doing it. But it's never happened. It's much easier for them just to steal. And the younger generation, people that are making MTV, some of them have moved into Hollywood films, but they are a generation of magpies, outrageous thieves, stealing ideas right and left. And they have amazingly little imagination of their own. If they didn't have people to steal from, I mean they'd really be hard up. And that's my opinion of them. I hope that doesn't sound bitter! I'm mostly just bemused.

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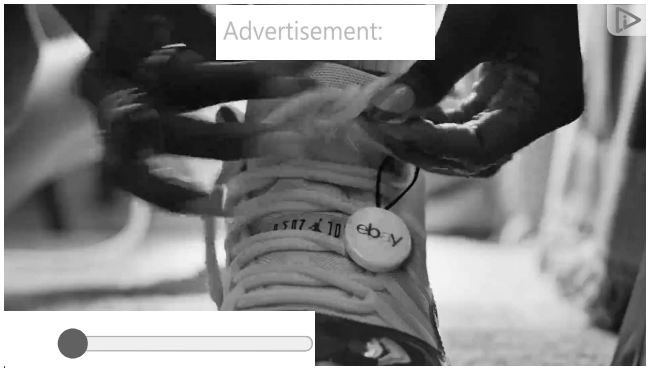

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